



September 1, 2020

The Honorable Chris Turner
Chair – House Committee on Higher Education
Texas Capitol E2.106

Chairman Turner,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Committee's request for information regarding Interim Charge #4. Our responses are below. Please contact Kevin Crusier with any questions or concerns.

Interim Charge 4:

Study the prevalence of online courses and degrees in higher education. Examine how institutions providing online courses and programs are accredited, particularly courses and programs originating from states other than Texas. Evaluate how students whose courses and degrees are primarily online perform in terms of persistence and degree completion versus students who take courses in traditional classroom settings. Study labor market outcomes for students with primarily online courses and degrees versus more traditional programs.

3. With institutions having shifted instruction to online-only in the Spring of 2020 because of the pandemic, what lessons have been learned?

- Many lessons have been learned from the spring, 2020 semester. One size does not fit all. At TWU over 30% of our classes were offered online before the pandemic and 50% of TWU students have taken at least one online class. However, even with existing expertise in online learning it was apparent that TWU had an immediate need to conduct intensive faculty development on how to transition a classroom course to an online environment while maintaining quality outcomes.
- Significant challenges remain in serving students with disabilities and the learning curve for providing a high quality education on-line while maintaining compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act has added novel challenges. At TWU, we feel strongly about the imperative to serve all of our students and we have invested significant time and financial resources to bridge the gap for students with disabilities. As a result, our online programs are stronger and more accessible than ever.
- One of the biggest lessons learned was the lack of access to hardware and technology among our students. Even in this day and age where everyone is online, many students sole connection to the online world was limited to their cell phones. Even though many students had previously taken classes online, they relied on public computers and printers to complete those courses. With the onset of the pandemic TWU worked hard to provide laptops and other technology to students but in the long term courses will either have to be adapted to cell phone and tablet technology or universities will need to provide better access to technology.

5. Post-pandemic, will the recent shift to online courses lead to expanded online demand and capacity?

- The ground has shifted in education. The long term effects of COVID-19 are impossible to predict accurately but it would be short sighted not to believe that educators and students will be incorporating substantially more online learning into all levels of education moving forward.
- To meet the demands of the post COVID-19 world in higher education, continued full funding for the Higher Education Fund (HEF) is paramount. For institutions like TWU, HEF funding was critical to enable TWU to invest in the technology needed to adapt to online learning and the need for investment in technology and IT infrastructure will continue to grow.
- We also expect more growth in “on-demand” courses particularly at the graduate and degree completion areas.

6. How can the Legislature address gaps in equity in accessing reliable, affordable Internet access?

- Non-traditional and first generation students face substantial hurdles to obtaining a degree in a traditional model and at TWU we are proud of the success that we have achieved in helping those students obtain a four-year degree. The onset of the pandemic exacerbated the challenges all of our students faced. At TWU over 50% of our students are Pell Eligible and/or first generation. Access to technology, including hardware and access to quality internet service, remains a challenge for many of our students. In order to meet the needs of our students during the pandemic TWU invested significant resources in providing the needed hardware, IT support, and even broadband access in parking garages. However, when many of the non-traditional students returned to their communities for online distance learning it was very hard for TWU or any university to help those students overcome the lack of connectivity in their communities. If Texas is to meet the goals 60x30 Texas will need to invest significantly in our broadband internet infrastructure. Too many Texas families do not have reliable access to the internet and that will continue to hold Texas back in the global economy if that lack of access is not addressed statewide.

7. What sort of differences in quality are we seeing for online nursing programs without a clinical component versus those that do have one or are done in person?

- All pre-licensure nursing programs (not yet Registered Nurses), must have a face-to-face patient experience. The percentage of time in patient care within the hospital or clinic versus the amount of time in either a simulation laboratory or in virtual simulation is dictated by the Texas Board of Nursing and was temporarily relaxed by the Governor in spring 2020 in order to move as many new nurses into the marketplace as possible. In addition, Nurse Practitioner graduate programs must have a set number of patient experience hours in order to sit for a certification exam. There has been no relaxation of these standards.



- The programs that have come into question are RN-BSN programs; these programs move Registered Nurses with either a diploma or an associate degree to a bachelor's degree in nursing. The public perception is that these programs do not have to have a clinical component. Unfortunately, many effectively do not, or they loosely interpret the standard on what constitutes "clinical." The American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the voice for academic nursing, specifically requires clinical experiences for these students and TWU meets AACN standards.
- At Texas Woman's University we are proud of our RN-BSN program as well as our online Masters in Nursing programs. We firmly believe that they produce high quality effective nurses for the Texas workforce.
- There are useful tools for evaluating the effectiveness of online as well as in person nursing programs.
 - The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, the accreditation body for exclusively Baccalaureate and higher degree nursing programs, reviews programs for adherence to this standard and cites programs which are deficient.